

Agenda Item No: 5

VIRTUAL SCHOOL

To: **Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee**

Meeting Date: **21 November 2018**

From: **Jo Pallett
Learning Directorate Lead for Vulnerable Groups
Head of the Virtual School**

Electoral division(s): **All**

Purpose: **To inform the committee of issues affecting the Virtual School**

Recommendation: **The Committee is asked to support the work of the Virtual School by taking issues discussed and areas for further development to Senior LA Colleagues, Head Teachers and Councillors.**

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Summary:

1 **Background**

- 1.1 The Virtual School is a statutory requirement of the Local Authority. Members have asked for themes for discussion at each meeting. This paper covers the discussion points of Early Years, School Admissions and the External Review of the Virtual School.

2 **Early Years**

2.1 **Early Years background.**

The Virtual School has, for many years, worked with Looked After Children (LAC) in the year before they started school.

In September 2015 we employed an Early Years specialist on a 0.5 full-time equivalent (fte) contract. This contract has been extended to 0.8fte since the outset due to demand for support. The Early Years specialist works with children from the term before they turn two.

There is no doubt that Early Years education is fundamental for the long term development of LAC pupils.

2.2 **Early Years points for information.**

- 2.2.1 Early Years work starts with children the term before they are aged two through to reception. Early Years children are more likely to be adopted or moved quickly to family members and as a result are often looked after for a limited period. This 'churn' makes it difficult to build relationships and measure any realistic impact.

There are currently 65 Early Years pupils on school roll.

More Early Years pupils remain within Cambridgeshire than older cohorts while Looked After. Approximately 80% remain within Cambridgeshire.

- 2.2.2 Early Years pupils are eligible for the Pupil Premium Funding for LAC to support additional interventions. The funding for Early Years pupil premium is £300 a year as opposed to £2,300 for older pupils.

This limited fund and the turnover of pupils means the funding has limited impact. The Virtual School coordinates the Pupil Premium allocation and monitors its spending in line with visits, networking and guidance papers.

- 2.2.3 Many Early Years placements are small scale, often single staff member organisations. This limits time for training and discussion for LAC pupils and adds a disproportionate pressure to settings to complete necessary reports such as Personal Education Plans (PEP).

To assist with this we have developed a bespoke Early Years PEP which focusses only on areas that are directly relevant to Early Years.

2.2.4 Training and development provision;

We provide training for Early Years settings on the role of the Designated Person, positive intervention strategies, attachment disorder etc in line with the training we offer other settings.

We run a networking session in different locations across the county each term for Early Years setting staff to get together to share best practice, consider joint concerns etc.

We provide training for Social Care staff and others within the LA.

Following a conference in June with all Virtual Staff from the Eastern Region we have organised a meeting for the Early Years specialist staff of the Eastern Region Virtual Schools to meet and further develop joint improvement strategies.

2.2.5 The interventions and support of the Virtual School has been able to support settings in identifying and progressing support for children who have additional needs. This includes helping to identify needs for Education Health and Care Plans, recognising a need for additional speech and language support and in gaining increased vocabulary to improve better interaction. This early support and recognition of need has helped children to positively engage in the education process.

2.2.6 Outcomes for Early Years LAC pupils is below the Cambridgeshire Early Years outcomes for all pupils. Un-validated data for Cambridgeshire; Foundation stage expected level of development, all pupils, 70% Foundation stage expected level of development, LAC pupils, 38%. Previous years data shows that LAC pupils nationally achieve less well than non LAC pupils in Early Years and that this gap widens as children progress through education.

3 **Admissions, Refusals and Alternative Provision.**

3.1 LAC pupils should be placed in schools which are rated good or better by OFSTED, application is not based on a school catchment area or the numbers already on the school roll.

Pupils can be placed in a school rated below good e.g. if the child already attended when the school changed rating, if there are no good schools within a reasonable travelling distance to the home placement or if the school has excellent support and experience of LAC pupils and the Ofsted rating relates to something which is easily remedied.

As LAC pupils should attend a good or better school there has been a disproportionate number of applications to these schools. LAC pupils can bring many qualities to a school but they also bring a range of additional needs and requirements which schools may not want. As a result many schools both primary and secondary have started to refuse applications from LAC pupils.

Our experience is that we receive more refusals, delays and blocks for applications to schools outside of Cambridgeshire and for pupils who have additional needs.

In general schools state they cannot accept the application as they are full or that the school cannot meet the needs of the young person.

- 3.2 When a school refuses a child we will question this initially with the school. I have contacted the CEO of academy chains to advise on appropriate legislation and the needs of vulnerable pupils. We have involved the Regional Schools Commissioner and/or the Secretary of State to direct schools to take pupils. We have worked closely with the admissions team and now have a clear process for initiating direction letters as soon as a school negatively responds to an application.

While we follow up on refused admissions and have directed schools to take pupils it must be remembered that during this time the child is out of education. The Virtual School pays for tuition during this period to engage/reengage the young person but this does bring additional pressure to the home placement and there are placement breakdowns while we are still trying to get a school to accept a pupil.

- 3.3 When taking children into care or moving young people the education of the child is not given a high priority by social care. As a result we have occasions where a young person is placed where there is no suitable education offer nearby. This creates difficulties of its own regarding education provision.

- 3.4 In Cambridgeshire there is no education provision for Primary aged pupils with additional needs who do not have an EHC plan. We are therefore often applying for a primary school place knowing that the school will need to access support from other, limited, Cambridgeshire services.

The funding arrangement for alternative provision for secondary aged pupils creates additional difficulties for admissions. If a pupil requires Alternative Provision this can only be accessed via a school roll. We are effectively asking schools to take a child on roll and pay for them to immediately access AP. This is expensive for the school and likely to have a negative impact on overall results. Almost half of year 11 LAC for 2018 came into care during Key Stage 4, the majority of the year 11 cohort were on an alternative provision package. This has a significant impact on their education opportunities and limits the options available Post 16.

- 3.5 There has been an increase in the number of LAC pupils from other counties requesting placements in Cambridgeshire schools. This is a particular issue in the Fenland area where large cheap housing has established a number of private homes/fostering placements used by other LAs. Cambridgeshire schools can therefore have a number of pupils from a number of counties with a variety of systems, paperwork, funding agreements and expectations.

If schools have a large LAC cohort they are less able/inclined to accept Cambridgeshire LAC applications. One secondary school has 20 LAC pupils, 4 are Cambridgeshire LAC.

4 The External Review of the Virtual School

- 4.1 During the summer term a review was undertaken of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Virtual Schools. This review was undertaken by a former Head of the Virtual School, Essex. The draft report was provided in August 2018.
- 4.2 Points for discussion included the option to unify the Virtual Schools into a Bi-County school. The Director of Education does not accept this as the correct route at this time. Rather the intention is to keep the schools separate as both have statutory responsibilities relating to their counties LAC and Pupil Premium grant arrangements, but to work collaboratively where possible.
- 4.3 Discussions between the two heads of schools over the last few years have already identified opportunities for joint working such as;
Shared training provision
Common principles of PP grant allocation
Common principles for PEP paperwork
We are currently working on a joint introduction to our development plans to outline more clearly how this collaborative approach will work.
- 4.4 The review identified some aspects of school development for both schools including improved data analysis, redrafting the rating systems and reviewing the school audits we undertake.

Overall however both Virtual Schools are considered to be operating well and the developments which have already been underway in the last few years will continue to take the school to a 'school improvement role' rather than a 'caseload role'.

5 Providing support for life skills such as budgeting.

- 5.1 The Virtual School does not run programmes of study which cover life skills. Such skills are part of the school curriculum and if appropriate part of tuition provided by bought in companies.

We have introduced summer activities for Post 16 pupils to prepare them for transition from school to college. This has also included work with unaccompanied asylum seeking children to familiarise them with various social situations and experiences.

A new 'homework' club has also started based at the YMCA and 'staffed' by volunteers from the university to support engagement with education and engender aspiration.

Such activities allow for more informal learning opportunities for young people.

6 Alignment with Corporate Priorities

6.1 Developing the local economy for the benefit of all

- 6.1.1 An appropriately skilled workforce is essential to Cambridgeshire's economic prosperity. Our aim is that all children achieve their potential, including LAC. High quality provision for this group of vulnerable students reduces the risk of them becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

6.2 **Helping people live healthy and independent lives**

6.2.1 A quality education and the acquisition of appropriate qualifications is one of the best ways of ensuring that LAC are able to lead healthy and independent lives.

6.3 **Supporting and protecting vulnerable people**

6.3.1 A key purpose of the Virtual School is to ensure that this group of vulnerable children and young people who are at risk of failing to achieve have access to a relevant curriculum that is appropriate for their needs and meets statutory and legal requirements

7 **Significant Implications**

7.1 Resource Implications, none within this paper

7.2 Statutory Legal and Risk Implications, none within this paper

7.3 Equality and Diversity Implications, none within this paper

7.4 Engagement and Communication Implications, none within this paper

7.5 Localism and Local Member Involvement, present in all three groups outlined.

7.6 Public Health Implications, none within this paper